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ABSTRACT

The Experimental English Composition Program, developed at Oklahoma State University, responds to the university's need for practical composition courses and the English faculty's concern for humanistic courses. This program presents a variety of instructional options with more personalized learning manuals and a combination of individually paced instruction and conventional instruction. In addition, the program offers many curricular options for composition objectives which complement students' educational goals. Eighteen one-semester credit hour courses are divided into three groups: basic skills education, liberal arts education, and career education. All courses in group 1 are required, and the university's six-hour composition requirement may be completed by a combination of courses in the second and third groups. (Diagrams of instructional models are included.) (JM)

An Experimental English Composition Program: Instructional and Curricular Models

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An Experimental English Composition Program:

Instructional and Curricular Models

Within institutions of higher learning appears a growing concern that students be viewed and treated as unique individuals with different needs, abilities, and interests. This concern is manifest in many institutional areas: the proliferation of degree titles and course topics, the swelling proportion of elective to required courses, and the expanding diversity of student services. This concern also affects the instructional process as indicated by the number of "new" approaches designed in an attempt to individualize instruction--"Individually Paced Instruction," and the "Keller Plan," to name but two. These programs have a common intent of either supplanting or offering an alternative to the traditional fixed-time, group-based methods which characterize what might be called the "conventional" mode of instruction. But unfortunately, the greatest need for more personalized instruction comes at a time when state legislatures and college administrators cry for cost-effective education; and this concept, by the time it filters down through the ranks to teachers, usually means educating with less money a greater number of students having every more diverse educational needs and goals.

If these forces affect postsecondary institutions in general, they affect English departments with large "service" composition programs in particular. But these forces are not the only problems confronting English departments.

Those of you who teach English will probably agree that many teachers of English presently face an identity crisis: not only are many teachers of the printed word afraid that they are becoming obsolete, but many have concluded that their primary function at a university may not be to enrich students and society in a humanistic way but rather to insure that technicians, scientists, and professionals develop basic prose skills. What English teachers enjoy most and understand best, the creation and teaching of fictive literature, appears to many a superfluity in this technical age.

Because of the uncertainty and confusion resulting from these sometimes contradictory forces and concerns, the English department at Oklahoma State University began to re-examine its Composition Program. As a result of this re-examination, the Department found that changes did need to be made in the Composition Program, that "servicing" the communication requirements of other disciplines was a valuable, desirable activity, and that indeed a solid composition program was requisite for even majors in literature and language, skills in written communication not being concommitant with literary interests. In fact, some concluded, a student with expertise in composition will make a more knowledgeable student of literature. Thus fortified, the Department underwent a period of intense scrutiny through committee work at all levels within the Department.

One experimental program, the topic of this paper, resulted. The Experimental English Composition Program, known as EECP, not only responds to the forces acting on higher education in general and the University's need for "service" composition courses, but it is also attentive to the broad humanistic concerns of the English faculty. This program offers a unique and encompassing system of study that answers the major criticisms of more conventional systems;

viz., that literary concerns have usurped time more properly spent on writing; that apprehensive and, in many cases, belligerent freshmen are exposed to impractical instructional materials; that composition courses are uninteresting; that essays are graded according to no consistent criteria; that students are forced to suffer through rather than actively participate in a meaningful program, one that concurs with their personal educational objectives.

The EECP is itself based on a fundamental concept of institutionalized instruction. Ideally, institutionalized instruction exists to accommodate its three principal components: the student, the subject matter, and the teacher.

Fig. 1. Components of Institutionalized Instruction

It is the interaction of these three elements that determines an instructional mode, be it lectures, directed readings, discussions, audio-visual activities, or inquiry sessions. This interaction is depicted in Figure 2.

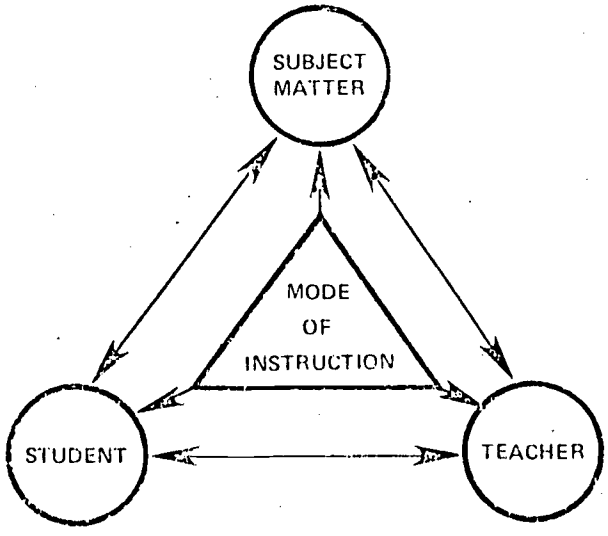

Fig. 2 A Conceptual Model of Instruction Showing the Interaction among the Three Principal Components

Because each student learns and each instructor teaches differently, the relationship among the three components is a dynamic one; and, ideally, the instructional mode will change in a given situation to meet the demands of the student, the teacher, and the subject matter.

However, the teacher who makes the decisions regarding the learning process is not entirely free: he is constrained by the limits imposed upon him by the institution he serves. He does not have available to him unlimited educational resources, unlimited time and space, students homogenious in attitudes and prerequisite skills, or arbitrary flexibility in institutional policy or tradition. Similarly, students suffer constraints on their ability to participate: both nonacademic and academic concerns command a great portion of their attention. Institutionalized instruction, while seemingly protected and isolated for academic freedom by the institution, does not occur in a vacuum and must adjust to the demands of reality. Such a situation, the interaction of teacher, student, and subject matter within the confines of an institution, is pictured in Figure 3.

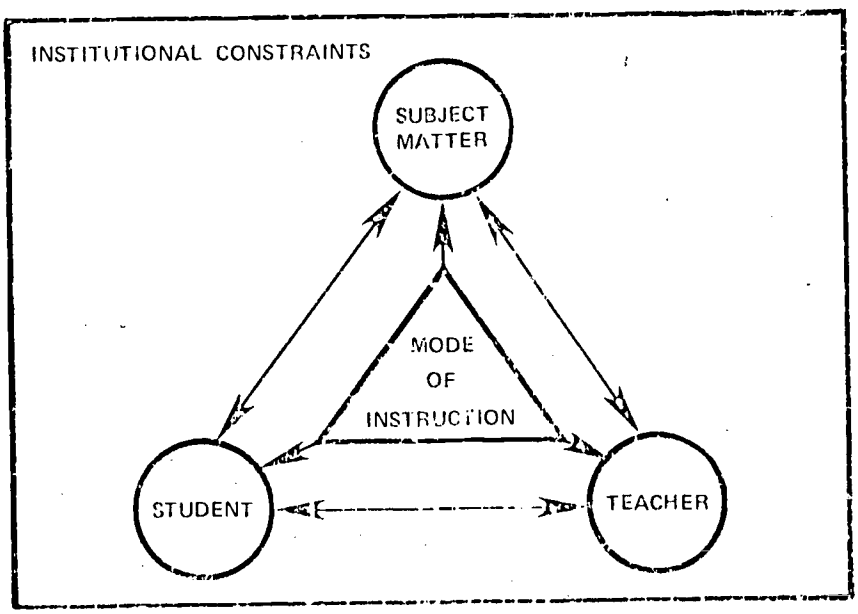

Fig. 3. A Conceptual Model of Institutionalized Instruction

Cognisant of the ideal situation for instruction and the reality of institutional constraints, the designers of the EECP saw it as a median program: neither are the dynamic aspects shown in the conceptual model of instruction (Fig. 2) lost, nor are the institutional constraints depicted in the conceptual model of institutionalized instruction ignored. The design of the EECP, then, is dramatically different from the design of the conventional college course, a model of which appears in Figure 4.

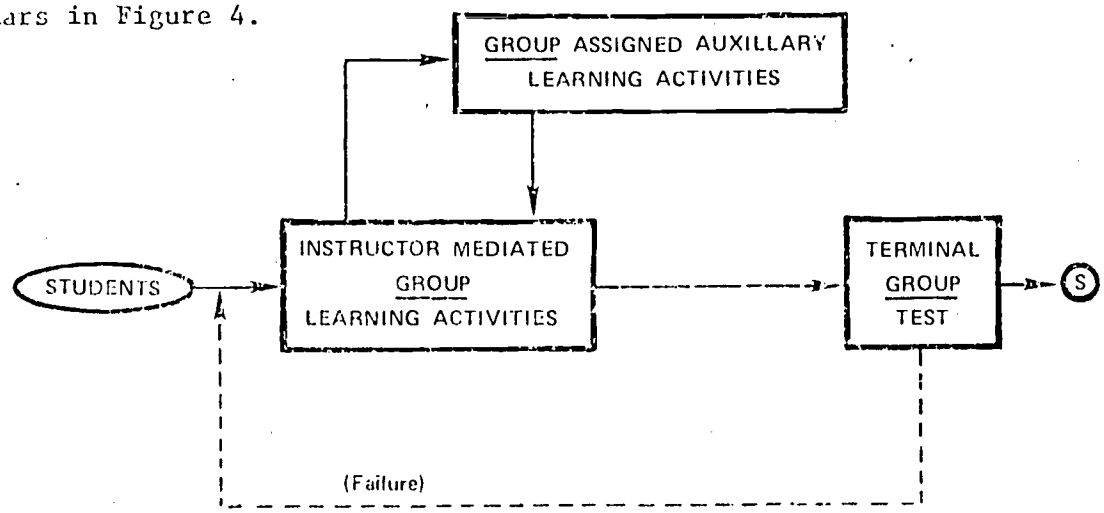

Fig. 4. A Model of Instruction in a Conventional College Course

In the traditional or conventional composition course, as in many college courses, instruction is caught in the institutional time-space allotment with the instructor providing most of the impetus, direction, and activities for not the individual student but for a group of students. Thus in conventional classes, learning is defined in terms of group progress and is made functionally dependent on time. Such instruction clearly accommodates institutional restrictions and constraints (e.g., the semester system) better than it does the basic components of instruction--the student, subject matter, and teacher. Furthermore, given the model of instruction in a conventional college course, we can easily see that the number of

instructional modes is limited and that the student and teacher need seldom, if ever, meet one-to-one.

However desirable instructional diversity may be, institutional constraints (e.g., budgetary constraints) preclude offering a multiplicity of instructional modes for every subject matter. Furthermore, the institution must somehow balance curricular breadth and instructional depth. Thus the desire to accommodate individually different students and the need to operate with limited resources are often at odds. Yet one of the principal goals of the EECP is to provide as many instructional options as possible within the bonds of operating institutional constraints. To achieve this end, the EECP designers, first, decided to organize the program around a concept of mastery learning and, consequently, to allow time to vary for the individual learner. Second, the designers modularized the learning manuals so that each manual contains a series of performance objectives, a rationale for each objective (i.e., a justification of that objective as a goal in the mastery process), instruction for the concept or skill the student is to master, learning activities and self-assessments (for which answer keys are provided in each manual), and a final assessment which measures whether or not the student has mastered each objective. The student's competence is determined on each assessment according to specific criteria.

Because the "subject matter" of the EECP is both content in the sense of concepts, facts, etc. to be learned and the skill of expository writing itself; and because individual students may well develop skills in different ways, the designers of the EECP believed that modularization of the subject matter had to take a unique form. That is to say, because some students develop writing skills by identifying and analyzing weaknesses in their own writing and in the writing of others and because some students develop writing skills through a step-by-step

synthesis of lesser skills into more complex skills, both an "analytic" and a "synthetic" approach to writing had to become part of the modularization scheme. In addition, some students preferred a combination of both approaches. In short, the two approaches to learning or teaching writing skills had to be presented concurrently in the learning manuals.

In addition to personalizing the learning manuals, the designers attempted to make instruction in general more personal. Thus the instructional mode lies at the heart of the EECP and can best be visualized as a combination of Individually Paced Instruction (IPI) and instruction through the conventional mode. In the EECP, these two modes operate concurrently; and the individual student may opt between being instructed via either mode or oscillating between them. Depicted graphically, the instructional model for the EECP appears in Figure 5.

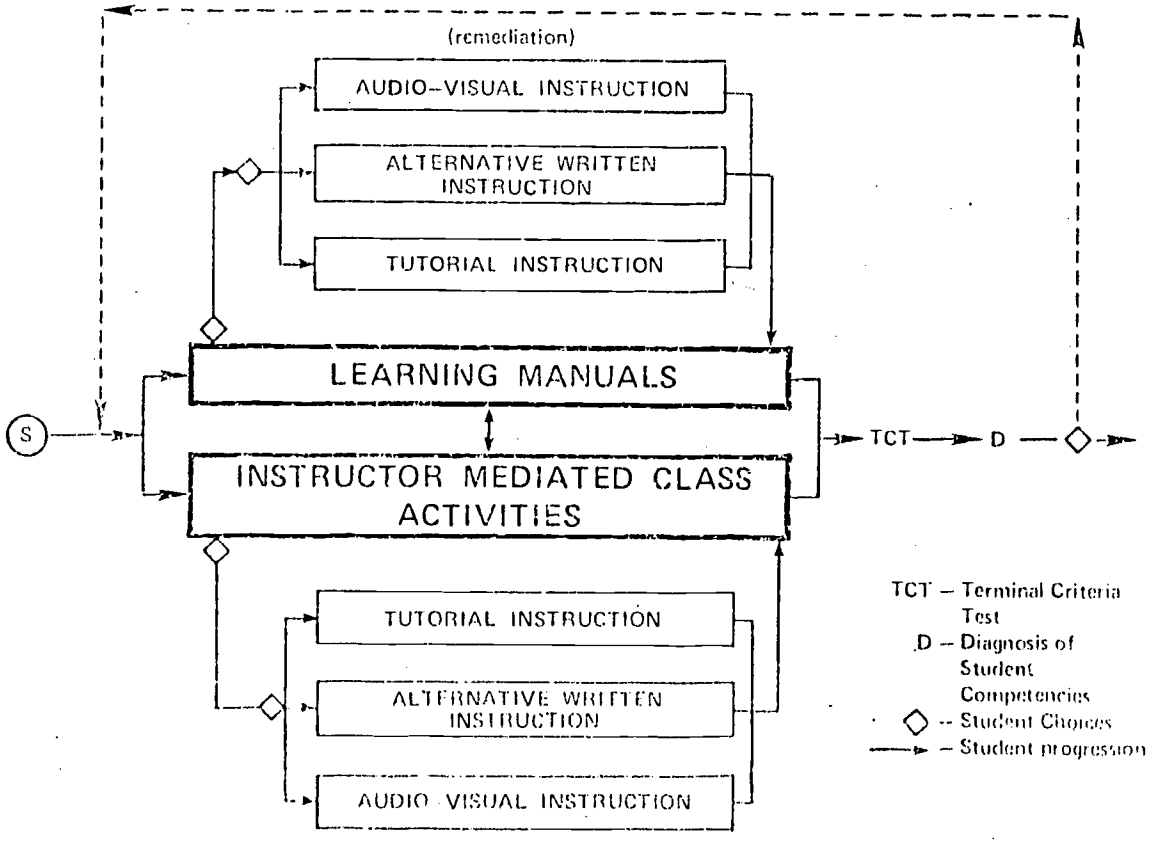

Fig. 5 The Model of Instruction Used in EECP

The designers of the EECP saw the simultaneous offering of both the conventional mode and the IPI mode as necessary inasmuch as the two modes appeared polarized in ways which seem to affect students with different learning "styles": instruction in IPI, for example, is primarily visual, "unfixed" in time, and separated from the social group; instruction in the conventional mode, on the other hand, is primarily oral, "fixed" in time, and offered in group context. The designers believed that if the two modes could be merged, a greater variety of student "learning styles" could be accommodated in a single instructional program.

In addition to a highly flexible instructional mode, the EECP offers the student many--1062 to be exact--curricular options for composition objectives that compliment his own educational goals. The curricular model consists of eighteen one-semester credit hour courses divided into three groups as shown in Figure 6.

GROUP I (BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION)

1. Writing Essays
2. Editing for Conventions and Style
3. Researching and Writing the Documented Essay

GROUP II (LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION)

4. Reading and Writing about Literature
5. Reading and Writing about Problems in Identity
6. Reading and Writing about the Impact of Technology
7. Reading and Writing about Heroes
8. Reading and Writing about the Roles of Women
9. Reading and Writing about Films

GROUP III (CAREER EDUCATION)

10. Applied Composition for Life Science Majors
11. Applied Composition for Business Majors
12. Applied Composition for Agriculture Majors
13. Applied Composition for Social Science Majors
14. Applied Composition for Humanities Majors
15. Applied Composition for Engineering Majors
16. Applied Composition for Engineering Technology Majors
17. Applied Composition for Home Economics Majors
18. Applied Composition for Physical Science Majors

Fig. 6. A List of Minicourses in the EECP

The minicourses in Group I will be required of all freshman students, must be taken in sequence, and teach only basic composition skills. To complete the University's six-hour composition requirement, the student will usually complete a combination of the minicourses in Groups II and III. The minicourses in Group II offer the student an opportunity through reading and writing to meet ideas which may or may not have an explicit relationship to his area of specialization, and the interdisciplinary themes the Group II courses can be changed as demand dictates. The student will be allowed to enroll in any minicourse in Group II at any time after he has completed successfully all the minicourses in Group I. Group III contains applied writing courses; and because they demand as a prerequisite considerable knowledge in particular fields, enrollment will be limited to second-semester juniors and to seniors. The student will be allowed to enroll in any Group III minicourse for either one or two credit hours after he has successfully completed the three minicourses in Group I and one minicourse in Group II.

Such a composition curriculum enables the student to earn the required six semester hours of composition in a variety of ways, as Figure 7 illustrates.

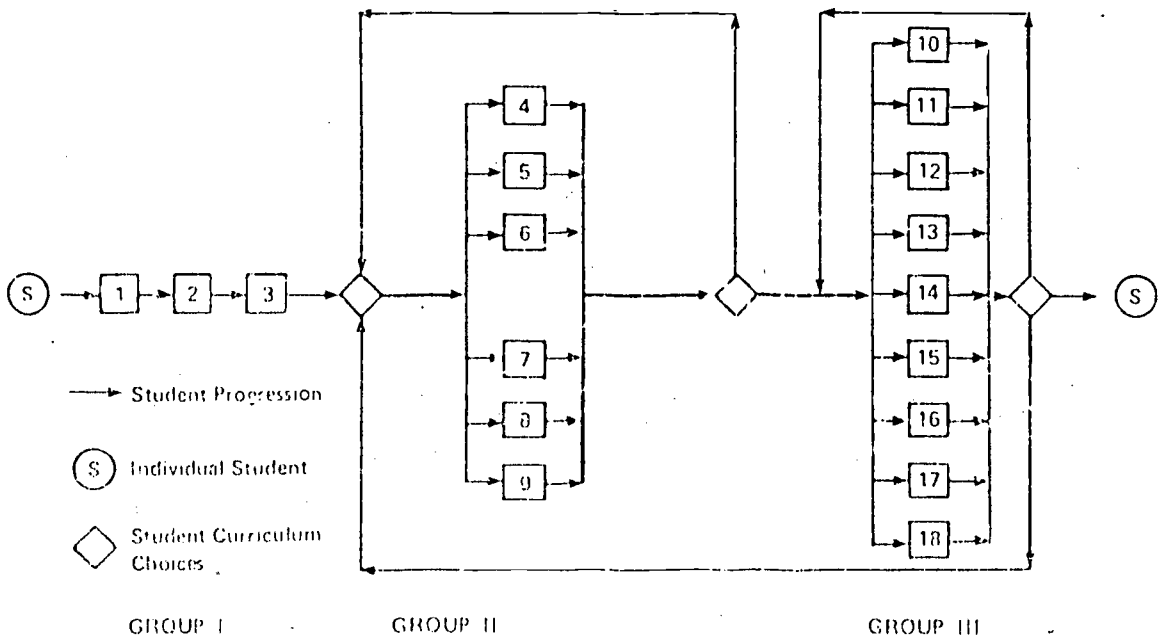

Fig. 7. EECP Curriculum Model Showing Student-Made Curriculum Choices

After the student has completed the minicourses in Group I (for three semester credit hours), he may, for example, complete the composition requirement by completing Minicourses 4, 5, and 14; or by completing 6, 9, and 17; or 6 and 17 (17 for two credit hours); or 8, 13, and 14; or 4, 5, and 6; etc.

In spite of these many curricular options and an instructional mode marked for its flexibility in accommodating many different kinds of learners, the EECP is not a completely personalized system of instruction. Yet it appears very attractive when one considers some of the constraints under which the EECP must operate. For example: the English Department cannot select the students who enroll in its Composition Program; it cannot afford to hire the personnel necessary for a more personalized program; because of budgetary constraints, the Department must use a larger number of teaching assistants, some of whom have had little or no teaching experience; the Department must abide by the University's semester system and cannot, therefore, give students unlimited time to complete a course, all grades "Incomplete" being carried over into subsequent semesters as teaching overloads; and the Department cannot reduce the number of students assigned to each teacher. Although the EECP as a personalized system of instruction has its limitations, they are not the result of a faulty design; they are, rather, limitations arising from the need to operate within an institution. A more personalized system of instruction is, of course, desirable; but such a system for a Composition Program that serves 3500 students each semester cannot be realized too quickly because it takes time to remove the institutional constraints which preclude the use of a truly personalized system of instruction in a large "service" Composition Program.